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TAGS: PHUM PREL SCUL IS NO
SUBJECT: NORWEGIAN UNIVERSITY TO VOTE ON BOYCOTT OF ISRAELI
ACADEMICS

REF: DANIELS-SELINGER (OSLO/EUR) E-MAILS NOV 6-10 2009

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¶1. (SBU) The board of Norway's University of Science and Technology in Trondheim (NTNU) will vote November 12 to decide whether to establish an academic boycott of Israel. Norwegian Minister for Research and Higher Education Tora Aasland (Socialist Left Party, SV), in an interview with leading newspaper Aftenposten November 9, stated that she is against the boycott proposal and that her statement reflects official government policy. The boycott, she said, would go against both academic freedom and the legal right of academics and researchers to choose their subjects and research methods. As the responsible minister, Aasland will be called to answer questions on the issue during a parliamentary question hour on Wednesday, November 11, according to media comments by opposition Christian Democratic Party (KrF) MP Hans Olav Syversen, who opposes the boycott. Syversen points out that Norwegian universities are state-owned, and asks in his media comments, "Are the universities' boards free to make decisions about attitudes on Norwegian foreign policy?"

¶2. (SBU) PolEcon Counselor called MFA Coordinator for North America Morten Aasland (no known relation to Minister Aasland) November 9 to seek MFA's views on the boycott vote. Aasland appreciated the Embassy's interest and the chance to comment. He said the academic boycott being proposed by "certain students and researchers at NTNU" is entirely contrary to Norwegian government policy of freedom of academics to choose their own connections, which is grounded in Norwegian law. Minister Aasland's comments earlier in the day were "precise and correct," he said. He added that Foreign Minister Stoere shared Minister Tora Aasland's views and had strong opinions against the boycott proposal, but felt somewhat constrained in addressing the issue publicly as it falls directly under Minister Aasland's responsibilities and hits on the delicate subject of the independence of academic institutions in Norway. The MFA feels certain the boycott will not muster the votes to be adopted, Morten Aasland added.

¶3. (SBU) Separately, the DCM had contacted Israeli DCM Aviad Ivri November 6 to ascertain the Israeli Mission's responses and actions to date on the threatened boycott. Ivri responded November 10. He said the boycott proposal had been preceded by a series of six anti-Israel lectures at NTNU, which began in September 2009. The series, entitled "Israel-Palestine conflict: what is research-based knowledge?" had been supported by NTNU's Rector Torbjørn Digernes. The Israeli Embassy in Oslo wrote a letter to Digernes, raising objections about the series, to which the rector chose to respond in blog postings. These postings generated a worldwide debate "which the rector lost," according to Ivri. He added, "This all happened before we

discovered the coming vote (at NTNU on the proposed boycott)." Ivri said another blogosphere debate over the boycott has since taken place, which, he said, "the university again lost."

¶4. (SBU) The Israelis raised the issue with the Norwegian Foreign Ministry (we understand this included an approach to the head of the Middle East section, Jorn Gjelstad), and briefed two Norwegian newspaper editors, which Ivri said "resulted in wonderful articles over the weekend" opposing the boycott. Embassy Oslo notes that NTNU rector Digernes has now come out clearly and publicly condemning the proposed boycott being considered by the NTNU Board, both in an interview November 3 with local Norwegian newspaper Adressa and in comments carried Sunday November 9 as part of a full page article condemning the boycott, written by Culture/Debate editor of Aftenposten Knut Olav Aamas.

¶5. (SBU) According to Ivri, 28 professors and assistant professors, led by NTNU Professor Bjoern Alsberg, have signed a petition (a translated version of which can be found on the Scholars for Peace in the Middle East website, www.spme.net) opposing the boycott, while 34 NTNU professors signed a petition requesting the boycott. According to media here, as of November 9, Alsberg's petition against the boycott has garnered wide-spread support and possibly several thousand signatures, including from 13 Nobel laureates. An editorial in large circulation Norwegian newspaper VG November 9 blasted the academic boycott proposal as "An Academic Scandal." One excerpt from that editorial follows: "Thoughts are free. When thoughts and opinions meet, that moves the world forward. If there's one place in the world where opinions and ideas do meet, it's Israel. Academics are often among those who go against the grain of official Israeli policies. Many Israeli academics call for dialogue rather

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than confrontation to resolve conflicts in teh Middle East. This makes it all the more absurd to boycott Israel's thinkers."

¶6. (SBU) Embassy Oslo continues to follow these developments closely and stands ready to engage further if Washington signals any additional USG concerns we could usefully relay to the GON.

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